

## Reflections

### Who hosts a politics of welcome? – commentary to Gill

JEN BAGELMAN



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This review is written as a letter, and addressed to my colleague Nick Gill. It is an effort to continue conversations about the politics of welcome as they relate to practices of asylum and our academic modes of inquiry into this field of study. In particular, this letter reflects upon Gill's piece, *The Suppression of Welcome*, which is based on his keynote lecture at the Finnish Geography Days 2017 in Turku.

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*Jen Bagelman, Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Streatham Campus, Northcote House, Exeter EX4 4QJ, UK. E-mail: j.bagelman@exeter.ac.uk, Twitter: @bagel\_woman*

I would like to begin by reflecting on the question of 'welcome' raised by Nick Gill's intervention specifically in relation to the welcome extended here, and one we regularly receive as academics. That is, the invitation to review.

This invitation, to enter the intellectual worlds of our colleagues, is largely mediated by journals as host. While the journal may differ, the style of invitation is predictably consistent: double-blind review. 'Please, Dr. X, would you consider reviewing this article which is written by someone you probably know, but who will remain nameless?' As both reviewer and author, we are blinded to our interlocutors. One may ask: while such anonymity (rarely complete) might facilitate impartiality, what is lost or – to borrow a term from Gill's (2018) title – 'suppressed'? If we are to take Arendt's (1985) famous assertion that we become political through our interactions with others and that this involves a process of disclosure and acknowledgment of the other, perhaps what is suppressed through blind-review is the possibility of political interlocution and politics itself.

What I appreciate about this open, online forum is the attempt to experiment with academic rituals of intellectual engagement, and thus politics. To embrace this opportunity I address you, Nick, more personally and offer my stream-of-consciousness comments in the spirit of promoting ongoing conversation...

**Dear Nick,**

I really enjoy how you foreground the swell of spontaneous, solidaristic expressions of welcome that we see emerging (despite/against hostile government policies). The sanctuary movement, to which you allude, is a concrete and lively example. I happen to know your understanding of this movement is rooted in personal experience of participating as a Trustee for the charity, City of Sanctuary. I also know that you've been particularly involved in cultivating the 'Universities of Sanctuary' stream that aims to secure equal access to higher education for refugees. I wonder how you see this work enacted through campus geographies connecting with, what Massey (2004) calls, extended 'geographies of responsibility'? And, what further work needs to be done to ensure that this sanctuary activism

remains 'outward-looking' such that we continue to address not only issues of resettlement but also the structural conditions forcing people to move in the first place?

In an earlier conversation we had, I mentioned that Magnusson's (2010) work (particularly *Seeing like a City*) could be theoretically helpful in fleshing out this distinction between sovereign/statist forms of governing from the spontaneous/everyday politics of welcome to which you refer. I really like how you've incorporated some of his work here. You carefully make the case that statist approaches tend to be enacted as clunky, cold, top-down and highly calculative. On the other hand, you gesture to the local as a place of community where more organic, warm, bottom-up and spontaneous forms of welcome emerge. The local, you suggest, is full of surprise that serves to challenge a suppressed, statist welcome. I find this distinction provocative, yet I am curious how you see these forms of governance bleeding into one another? As has been made explicit in the news these past few weeks through the Windrush Scandal, 'hostile environments' are produced through exclusionary state policy and sustained by daily enactments within our local geographies. I am thinking here also about the blanket 'study bans' that are denying asylum seekers the right to education in the UK, a government policy that takes shape through acts of daily compliance on campus. If hostility is not simply a top-down policy, but rather a wider socio-cultural-political environment it seems that we must think more critically about our localities as both spaces of hospitality, and spaces wherein hostilities are made manifest.

Your piece also makes me reflect upon the temporal relationship between spontaneous and sustainable activism. As you rightly point out, we need to ensure that the 'surprising' forms of welcome that have emerged in response to spectacularly tragic stories of global displacement continue to support people with precarious even as surprise in the spectacular begins to wane. I was recently in Berlin for a Geography fieldtrip during which time students noted the host of 'pop-up' provisional services in the city, providing everything from housing to health-care for refugees. While these DIY politics are essential, your attention to questions of sustainability remind me that such improvised urbanisms must also address the protracted and structural challenges of, say, gentrification that render such spaces and forms of care temporary. Your provocation left me wondering: can we at once engage in pop-up politics while still challenging the long-standing (capital, colonial...) structural forces that deepen and extend precariousness?

Though the spontaneous forms of activism that have fallen under the rallying cry 'refugees welcome' may be effective, you also provide a compelling critique of this discourse. You suggest that exclusively affixing attention to 'the refugee' problem, risks occluding those in forgotten corridors, the internally displaced who never cross a state border, asylum seekers held indefinitely waiting even for the designation 'refugee.' This discursive bordering limits our ability to respond to displacement as an intersectional and intractable problem. I would like to continue to push you on how the displacement of refugees and the dispossession born out of settler colonialism might be thought (albeit uncomfortably) together? How can we as academics heed the call made by activist Walia (2013) in her book *Border Imperialism*, to forge necessary solidarities that challenge state violence that displace both refugee and Indigenous communities?

I appreciate how you draw out a more intersectional approach through your gendered critique of 'the' refugee crisis discourse. You evoke scholars like Lauren Wolfe who have argued that while we hear relatively little about women from women we paradoxically see women in the 'current' crisis. The female body, and her baby, often stands in metonymically for humanitarian crisis. Wright argues this is, in fact, not so much strange but strategic. There is a strategic visibility, whereby women and children come into focus as spectacular victims yet their stories of migration and agency remain submerged and out of sight. They are, in other words, the poster-child of a crisis in which they are often absented, largely forgotten. I found it productive how you explore how this gets refracted in ostensibly welcoming discourses. I wonder how we might queer these conversations: in what ways do determination processes, and our own academic languages, rely upon and reify gender norms that deny an acknowledgement of those lives that do not fit within tidy binaries?

Nick, you end with a critical reflection on experiential knowledge. You suggest that, "an over-emphasis on numeric aspects of welcome over lived experiences undermines the basis of welcome itself" (Gill 2018, 93). I read this as a powerful call to attend more carefully to intimacies and expertise

born from experience. As you point out, in our current academic landscape, this call is increasingly articulated in terms of an imperative to do community-engaged research with 'impact.' While this agenda may be a welcome turn towards widening participation you suggest we should remain critical of the conditions placed on this invitation. Circling back to my opening comments regarding the spaces of welcome enacted within the academy, and in light of your intervention, I am minded to ask: in a metric-driven environment, who measures the success of an invitation to participate in research? Who profits from this welcome? And, most significantly, who is the host? These questions that are invited through your work represent a welcome challenge – one that compels us to think less about our benevolence and more about unsettling academic privilege.

Thanks,  
Jen

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